



Player Name	Points	Rebounds	Assists	Steals	Blocks	Fouls
Adrian	10	2	1	0	0	1
Brandon	10	3	1	0	0	1
James	11	2	1	0	0	1
Michael	10	2	1	0	0	1
Robert	10	2	1	0	0	1





PRIVATE COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES EMBRACE ESPORTS

Recruiting Athletes, Building New Programming, and Preparing a Workforce

by Rachel Clevenger

As of 2020, only six years have passed since Robert Morris University made a splash by becoming the first college in America to offer scholarships to students to be members of their League of Legends team, which prompted their varsity eSports program. In press releases from 2014, they announced a desire to recognize the growing legitimacy of eSports and to reward students with a competitive spirit who didn't play traditional sports.



“That’s Not A Sport”: RMU eSports Team Earns Corporate Partnership

In the last few years, RMU has turned into a powerhouse with remarkable facilities. RMU Associate Athletic Director Kurt Melcher, who was in charge of the newly developed program at its inception, explained that the feedback he received from both sides was interesting: Gamers felt like they had finally been vindicated, and those on the side of the “hardcore athletes” held a different position: “What do you mean? That’s not a sport?”

Robert Morris University is still breaking new ground in 2019, by brokering a corporate partnership with Mountain Dew AMP Game Fuel, a drink designed with gamers in mind. Deb Erdley, of the *Tribune-Review*, notes they likely gained their sponsorship by earning a spot among the final four of a national tournament, featuring a team that has almost 50 members who compete in eight games, and making a strong showing during their first years as a member of NACE. Erdley asks, “Can million-dollar coaching contracts, packed arenas and victory celebrations with players drenched in sugar energy drinks be far behind?”

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"Athletics, whether they're played on the field or online, provide opportunities for deeper learning; eSports provide students with a training ground to practice making rapid decisions, managing resources and expenditures, and working as a team. All of these skills are essential for the professions of the future." — DR. JORGE L. DÍAZ-HERRERA

NACE Consistently Adding Member Colleges

By now, most of us are familiar with The National Association of Collegiate Esports (NACE), a nonprofit membership association formed in 2016—one that is focused on advancing collegiate eSports, especially within the varsity space. The sole association for varsity eSports for universities and colleges, NACE currently boasts over 170 member schools and over five thousand student-athletes.

Robert Morris University was not the only school to jump into eSports during its infancy. In 2014, two years before NACE was officially formed, The University of Pikeville became the second college to include eSports among their varsity athletics, and they started offering eSports scholarships the following year. At UPike, as with more-traditional athletic scholarships, students must maintain a minimum GPA and attend mandatory practice sessions. Keuka College founded its varsity eSports program in 2015. The

team benefitted from a \$2 million dollar network infrastructure. Keuka College president during this period, Dr. Jorge L. Díaz-Herrera, shared in a press release, "Athletics, whether they're played on the field or online, provide opportunities for deeper learning," he said. "eSports provide students with a training ground to practice making rapid decisions, managing resources and expenditures, and working as a team. All of these skills are essential for the professions of the future." Also founded in the fall of 2015, Kansas Wesleyan University's program was successfully competing against teams from larger schools and built a state-of-the-art facility for eSports.

The eSports program at Maryville University in Missouri, which started in 2015, became a significant contender in college eSports when they won Dreamhack's 2016 League of Legends championship. Their Director of eSports, Daniel Clerke, noted at the time, "eSports is the biggest thing that nobody knows about. To put it in perspective, the League of Legends World Championship last year was viewed by more people than every sporting event except the Super Bowl, and that includes the World Cup."

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“Video gaming just as impressive...as excellence in traditional sports”: Columbia College’s Enthusiastic Leadership

Columbia College is another of the earliest proponents of eSports. After a videogame challenge with his students in 2014, with a year of free textbooks on the line if they could beat him in *Madden NFL*, Columbia College President Scott Dalrymple was inspired to start their program. In a 2015 press release, as they announced eSports coming in 2016, Dalrymple offered this enthusiastic praise for eSports: “eSports aren’t the future. They’re the present. True skill at video gaming is just as impressive—and just as legitimate—as excellence in traditional sports.” In 2019, the Columbia College Athletic Department announced the hiring of Doruk Hacıoglu as the head eSports coach. Hacıoglu notes he had been following the program since its inception, and he was seeking a place with the values he shared, in terms of long-term development with the players. “The main focus for the program isn’t only to win,” says Hacıoglu, “but to develop talent while also allowing these players to pursue their academic career and get a degree.”

“It links well with a liberal arts education”: A Few Other Institutions Joining the Game

Though some of the earliest proponents of eSports have had their stories shared by multiple outlets, there are many private colleges and private universities that have started programs, developed facilities, and started recruiting athletes and coaching staff. Though certainly not all are represented in this column, the following is a broad overview of just a few of those institutions who have grabbed this opportunity over the last few years.

In the fall of 2016, Nebraska’s Midland University opened up their varsity eSports program, and Southwest Baptist University in Missouri created their eSports program in an effort to engage new groups of students who weren’t active in other clubs or groups on campus.

Ohio’s Lourdes University introduced a varsity eSports program in 2017. The new university president at that time, Mary Ann Gawelek, sought to take Lourdes in new directions, and she was a strong advocate for the program since she took office. Gawelek noted, “In order to participate in eSports you have to have the mental ability and critical thinking skills to do game-playing in general, you have to have developed the ability to function on a team, and you have to have a competitive nature that drives you toward success...It links well with a liberal arts education.”

In the fall of 2017, Tiffin University launched their varsity eSports program, complete with a dedicated eSports facility. Also in the fall of 2017, Stephens College in Missouri became the first all-women’s college to have a varsity eSports program.

“eSports puts an exciting, innovative, unique spin on competition”: New Facilities, New Scholarship, and New Interests

Illinois Wesleyan University began their program, and offering partial scholarships, in the fall of 2018. In 2017, they hired Callum Fletcher to build the new program and coach the players. In a press release that year, they shared that Callum—as an event manager—had helped organize and run the world championship for Big Buck Hunter, which featured over \$100,000 in prizes. IWU also constructed an impressive eSports campus facility.

Ohio’s Ashland University offers a varsity eSports program, and eSports teams hold practices in the school’s on-campus facility. They also host guest speakers, mostly professional players, to speak to athletes in seminars. In Southwestern’s varsity eSports program, they provide potential athletes with options of becoming grant recipients within two subcategories: competitors—who play on the team—or participants—who assist with stream management and event management.

Trine University in Indiana launched its program in the 2017-2018 school year. In 2018, they finished construction on the MTI Center, which houses their bowling and basketball facilities and all varsity teams, including a state-of-the-art eSports facility. Assistant Vice President for Athletics, Matt Land, noted, “eSports puts an exciting, innovative and unique spin on competition that will allow us to address the new interests of our students.”

“eSports represents significant growth potential”: Student Recruitment and Student Retention

The University of Jamestown created its eSports team in the fall of 2017, and The Jimmies compete in NACE’s League of Legends, Hearthstone, and other games. Lees-McRae College’s eSports program is one of the newest in the nation. Additionally, King’s College announced its plan to enter the eSports arena in fall 2020. Associate Vice President Cheryl Ish shared in a media release, “Coupled with the college’s other men and women sports, eSports represents a significant growth potential in attracting and retaining students.”

Ish further noted their plan to “add another dimension to the landscape of extracurricular offerings for our students” in the form of eSports in the hope of getting out “in front of the eSports movement that’s evolving on scholastic and college campuses nationwide.”

King’s will join NACE, as one of its more than 170 member institutions. Once King’s has been added, NACE will have nine Middle Atlantic Conference Schools, including Misericordia University, Stevenson University, Arcadia University, Lebanon Valley College, DeSales University, Albright College, Hood College, and Widener University.

In “Leveling Up Esports on Campus” in *Inside Higher Ed*, Lindsay McKinzie wrote in October of 2019, “Colleges don’t need fancy arenas or hundreds of high-speed computers to launch eSports teams, but they do need engaged students.” McKinzie argued that eSports facilities are fast becoming must-haves on campus, citing the 2019 Educause conference, where dozens of IT leaders referenced introducing eSports at their colleges.

McKinzie suggests that student recruitment is also playing a significant role in college administrators’ decision to introduce eSports. McKinzie references Jackie Stampalia, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute’s Director of Client Information Services, who said, “RPI has offered video game design classes for more than a decade, but the push to support eSports came from students.”

“It’s a growing industry, in which money is made”: Presidents Must Make Firm Commitment to Value of eSports

In July 2019’s issue of *Education Dive*, Julie Wootton-Greener advises colleges to expand their eSports programs to keep pace with this industry. Wootton-Greener adds, “Online gaming is poised to generate \$1.1 billion in revenue globally this year, spurring colleges to add curricula teaching students how to work in the field. It’s a growing industry, in which money is made from activities such as streaming, franchising and sponsorships.” As she explains, as these programs expand, more institutions are teaching students how to work in this field—through full degrees, courses, or certificates—and with focuses on marketing and broadcasting, business management, or team development.

Last fall, for instance, Becker College started offering a B.S. degree in eSports management, and this fall they are launching a second bachelor’s degree in eSports, one focused on content management and emerging media. All of their eSports classes connect to Becker College’s business department and are taught by industry leaders, using project-based learning. Finally, Becker is offering a free summer program geared to high school students that’s an overview of eSports Management, targeting students from underserved backgrounds. From a slightly different angle, Syracuse University launched the course eSports and Media just last year, where students cover live broadcasting, the history of eSports, and develop marketing plans.

Wootton-Greener also cites Kevin Mitchell, who is the Director of Business Development and Strategic Intelligence at National Amusements, as well as an adjunct professor for eSports classes at Emerson. Mitchell notes there are outstanding opportunities in eSports, but not the skilled workforce to fill those positions.

For colleges that want to develop their curriculum, Mitchell believes that engaging administrators is key and suggests the most significant obstacle colleges face when implementing their programming is awareness that eSports is viable. Ian Ritacco, dean of Becker’s School of Design and Technology, seconds that argument, adding that university and college presidents who don’t have a strong grasp of eSports, as well as a firm commitment to the value of eSports, could hamper effective program development.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. Rachel James Clevenger earned her M.Ed. degree from Mississippi College. After finishing her PhD in Composition and Rhetoric, she taught and served as the University Writing Center Director for Birmingham Southern College and University of Alabama at Birmingham. Most recently, she taught Business Communications at Samford University.

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